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ABSTRACT

The paper describes three creative and performing arts projects for handicapped persons: the production of a Shakespearean play using institutionalized mentally retarded adults; poetry writing with blind, deaf, physically handicapped and mentally retarded persons; and water ballet with mentally retarded adults. (CL)

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THE CREATIVE AND PERFORMING ARTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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Identifier: Curriculum,
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ABSTRACT

The creative and performing arts in special education offer an opportunity for handicapped people to explore their creative ability, improve their motor and cognitive skills, and to experience learning as an enjoyable activity. This article describes three projects that produced unique experiences in the arts that might be replicated in the future by people working with the handicapped. One project was the production of a Shakespearean play using institutionalized mentally retarded adults, a second project was teaching peotry writing to blind, deaf, physically handicapped and mentally retarded people, and the third project was teaching water ballet to mentally retarded adults.

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The development of curriculum in the field of the creative and performing arts has been badly neglected in Special Education classes in the United States. Curriculum for handicapped children should include activities designed to improve gross and fine motor coordination. Dance includes gross and fine motor coordination. Art includes gross and fine motor coordination. Drama includes gross and fine motor coordination. How about language development? Is there a more motivating, useful, and enjoyable way of teaching language skills than through the use of poetry, drama or music?

Traditionally, our attention to curriculum has focused upon the development of functional skills. In the future, we need to be more cognizant of two aspects of the creative and performing arts. First, the creative and performing arts are functional -- i.e., we can teach number concepts, writing, spelling, reading, and conceptual skill development through all the arts. Second, curriculum based upon the creative and performing arts is enjoyable and gives even the most severely handicapped people the opportunity to express themselves.

Several projects I have worked on in the last few years have utilized the creative and performing arts with handicapped populations. Shakespeare in an institution for the mentally retarded, poetry with the deaf and blind, and dance with a heterogeneous group of handicapped people have all been enormously successful in the development of functional skills. Did you ever try and teach a mentally retarded child to pay attention to a spelling lesson? Try teaching children to spell a list of five words as part of the process of writing a poem. Here is what a group of four institutionalized mentally retarded people had to say (and write, and spell, and read) after a creative teaching session using dance and some drawing activities as part of a language development - poetry project.

> The earrings are like onion rings
> as big as the earth
> it would take years and years and years to eat them.

What a joyless existence handicapped people have if their only exposure to learning is for "adjustment"? Indeed, what a joyless existence we all would have if we were not given the opportunity to see the sweep of Beethoven and hear the colors of Gauguin.

The Shakespeare project, funded by a grant from the State Department of Retardation in Florida, was completed three years ago at the Sunland Training Center in Miami, Florida. Over the course of 5 months, I and 15 of my undergraduate students from Florida International University worked on a production of A Midsummer Night's Dream, using institutionalized mentally retarded adults as the entire cast. We initially chose A Midsummer Night's Dream because it is one of the easiest Shakespearean plays to produce from a staging point of view, but more importantly, because the theme is light and airy, and thus more easily adaptable for use by the mentally retarded (than is one of the tragedies). Our primary goal was really to experiment with play production and to find out if this type of population could actually put on a legitimate Shakespearean play.

We started by forming a "Land of the Sun" Repertory Company, with each member receiving a laminated membership card. This enabled cast members to feel they belonged to something unique. Rehearsals took place every Thursday evening and every Sunday afternoon. We experimented at first with my students individually tutoring cast members, but we quickly discovered two serious problems. First, the original lines were too difficult and too far removed from the language experience of our cast members, and second, there was too much time between rehearsals, so that lines learned on a Thursday were quickly forgotten by Sunday. So, I rewrote the

play, using language that was easily understood by cast members. We solved the rehearsal problem by making the learning more meaningful - i.e., all the lines were paired with a particular stage movement, so that each cast member simply concentrated first on where they were physically located, or what type of movement they were engaged in (e.g. a sword fight). As the rehearsals progressed, we discovered that some of the cast members who were becoming disenchanted with Shakespeare enjoyed participating in making sets or helping to sew costumes. It became clear, though, that our original goal was not realistic, so we concentrated instead on the production of a scene from Shakespeare combined with training in improvisational drama. On the day of the play, we presented to an audience of about 300 people a scene from A Midsummer Night's Dream, lasting about 10 minutes, and 45 minutes of improvisational drama. The improvisational work started by having our announcer on stage ask the audience to shout out an idea they would like to see acted out - e.g. a day on a fishing boat. The actors who were standing on the stage quickly formed a huddle to decide what to do and what props that were scattered about the stage were to be used, (the props consisted of brooms, chairs, tablecloths, a vacuum cleaner, some old clothes, etc). As soon as the huddle was formed, the curtain was pulled, and once the actors were in position, the curtain was opened and the improvisational work began. Once the announcer saw that the scene was beginning to lose some creative spark, he shouted "freeze" and

the actors remained silent and immobile. Then the announcer asked the audience for another idea, and the process was repeated, but not until the curtain closed. Thus, the opening and shutting of the curtain served as a cue for the beginning and end of the organization of the improvisational scenes.

The second project I'd like to describe for you was part of the National Endowment for the Arts Poets in the Schools Program. The Winter, 1976 edition of Teaching Exceptional Children describes some of the work I did in teaching poetry to deaf, blind, orthopedically handicapped, and mentally retarded children. I received a special grant to visit the state institutions for the mentally retarded to try and teach the retarded adults to express themselves through poetry. In this instance, I used many kinds of stimuli to get the creative juices flowing, but I found that the use of body movement was the most effective way to stimulate the poetry writers. For example, if I were showing a group of students an elaborate Japanese woodcut print of a unicorn, I would not only ask them what the picture looked like, but I would ask them to act out how it would feel to have a horn coming out of their forehead. We did one interesting exercise on eating where the poets were asked to think of the colors, smells, taste, and texture of their favorite food. They were then instructed to pretend that they were eating the food, so that they could tell me why the "crispness of bacon" was as crunchy as broken glass.

The third project took place in a Miami group home for

retarded adults. This project, called ADMIT, which was an acronym for Art and Dance for Motor Improvement Training, was funded by the City of Miami Department of Parks and Recreation. The project lasted about 3 months and provided enrichment activities in dance and music for about 50 retarded adults. What was unique about ADMIT is that I incorporated water ballet into the training. We would learn to square dance or cha cha on one day and in subsequent days we incorporated those dances in the swimming pool of the group home. Thus, we encouraged the people to improvise leg and arm movement in the water in time to music. In this instance, we were also trying to specifically improve motor coordination.

What is most important about the projects described above is that the benefits derived by handicapped people were both practical and what one might call"personality developmental". With very few exceptions, all the people who worked on these projects, both teachers and students, enjoyed the experience. The desire to be creative and to express feelings seem to be universal needs which bring great pleasure. While it is quite true that in all the projects I originally intended to measure cognitive and/or motor improvement, I found myself not paying much attention to those important research components. I was simply having too much fun.

Well, what is the point of all of this for the future of special education. I can think of a few suggestions that I hope will spur more interest in the creative and performing arts. First, I think all teacher training should include

required course work in the arts. I get involved in the arts because I have read Shakespeare and have worked professionally as a filmmaker. Second, I think the Council for Exceptional Children should start devoting much more time and effort in support of fund raising for projects like the Very Special Arts Festivals now being conducted by the National Committee, Arts for the Handicapped. Third, some research efforts should be made to substantiate claims about improved motivation, learning, etc. as a result of emphasis on curriculum in the arts. Fourth, and probably most important, the future of the arts in special education will be dependent upon those bright and creative minds who must begin to make their thoughts known to those "leaders" in the field who in, my opinion, are too often involved with the same dull and boring approaches to teaching that have dominated special education as long as I have worked professionally in the field.

If we view the arts as a common meeting ground, much of the meaning of the word "exceptional" disappears. I know mentally retarded people who are better musicians than anyone in this room, and blind people who can sculpt at a professional level. To those of you who may be Ph.D's but are tone deaf, I ask you where your music IQ might place you?